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AUTHOR	Marshall, Jerilyn
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results of a survey that gathered information on the use of popular culture examples in college library instruction sessions, including the types of popular culture materials currently being used as examples, the types of courses in which they are used, the librarians' purposes in using the examples, and the librarians' impressions of whether or not the examples had an effect on the success of the session. A call for participation in the survey was distributed through two online discussion lists, BI-L and LIBREF-L during December 2001. Librarians working at the University of Northern Iowa were also invited to participate. A total of 21 responses were received. Results indicated that librarians use popular culture examples for several purposes during library instruction sessions, including gaining and holding students' attention, injecting humor, and illustrating the research process. In deciding how to present the examples, librarians should consider copyright issues, as well as the currency of the film, television show, or comic used. The use of images and examples to interest students can lead to greater attention to and acceptance of the content of the instruction and has the potential to facilitate creation of a stronger connection between the librarian and students. (MES)

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"What Would Buffy Do? The Use of Popular Culture Examples in Undergraduate Library Instruction."

Jerilyn Marshall
Reference & Instructional Services Department
Rod Library
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50613-3675

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Willow: "Images of Pop Culture." This is good. They watch movies, TV shows, even commercials.
Buffy: For credit?
Willow: Isn't college cool?
"The Freshman," Season 4, Episode 1 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

In the dialogue above, Buffy and her friend Willow are in their first semester of college and trying to decide which courses to take. The pop culture class attracts them because it seems easy and familiar. It seems that all they would have to do is watch movies and TV shows, just as they have been doing all of their lives. To these young undergraduates it sounds like a dream course.

This dialogue is more than a little ironic, considering that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of the biggest pop culture phenomena of the late 20th to early 21st century. The show frequently refers to popular culture, and also is self-referential to its own pop culture success. In "The Freshman" episode Buffy's friend Xander says to her, "Let me tell you something, when it's dark and I'm all alone and I'm scared or freaked out or whatever, I always think, 'What would Buffy do?' You're my hero." Building on that line, vendors now sell cross pendants with the letters WWBD (for What Would Buffy Do?) through the Internet. The question is very similar to a popular phrase among Christians, What Would Jesus Do?

Buffy the Vampire Slayer also appeals to librarians. For the first several seasons a librarian character was the mentor/watcher for the Buffy character. This show is one that librarians and students alike have watched every week for the past five or six years.

Members of the two groups who watch the show share knowledge of Buffy, the pop culture icon. The show symbolizes a potential meeting of the minds between the older generation (librarians) and the younger generation (college students). Buffy listens to Giles the librarian, as they have a common interest in fighting vampires and he has been assigned to help her develop into a mature vampire slayer. In the real world, instruction librarians assist students in developing into mature researchers, and some instruction librarians have realized that popular culture can be used as a tool for helping students make connections so that the content of instruction sessions is more relevant to them.

Popular Culture in the Classroom

Teachers in elementary and secondary schools have for years been developing methods for motivating students by making learning more fun and entertaining for them and by focusing instruction on the students' interests. One way to appeal to these interests is to include popular culture examples and assignments in the classroom. Students consider forms of popular culture such as television, movies, comics, and music to be essential parts of their lives.

One author has made a connection between the use of popular culture examples as a teaching tool and the movement toward the learner-centered classroom:

> "We should start knowing that the social experience the child already possesses is valid and significant, and that this social experience should be reflected back to him as being valid and significant. It can only be reflected back to him if it is part of the texture of the learning experience we create." (Asselin 2001, 47)

School librarians have ridden the same wave as teachers have by using popular culture during instruction sessions to engage younger learners (Kirsch 1995; Partain 2001). Librarians who work in higher education are also picking up on the trend.

Survey on Librarians' Use of Popular Culture Examples

A discussion on the use of popular culture examples during library instruction sessions was conducted on the BI-L discussion list in September 2001. The list is dedicated to discussion of topics relating to library instruction, and most of its members are practicing librarians. A searchable archive of the list is available at http://bubl.ac.uk/mail/bild/. Most of the popular culture discussion consisted of the posting of names and descriptions of films, TV shows, and cartoons that are being or could be used by instruction librarians to illustrate the research process or critical thinking. A large number of examples were posted during the discussion. These included films such as *Erin Brockovich*, *Finding Forrester*, and *Seven*; television shows such as *The Simpsons*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Futurama*; and comics such as Calvin and Hobbes, Conan the Librarian, and a variety of comic panels that have appeared in publications such as *The New Yorker* or in compilations on the Web. It appeared that many librarians are using these sorts of examples in the instruction sessions they are teaching.

A subsequent literature review revealed that very few, if any, university or college librarians have published articles on the use of popular culture examples in library instruction sessions. The author developed a preliminary survey to gather information on this topic. The survey asks questions about the types of popular culture materials

currently being used as examples, the types of courses in which they are used, the librarians' purposes in using the examples, and the librarians' impressions of whether or not the examples had an effect on the success of the sessions.

A call for participation in the survey was distributed through two online discussion lists, BI-L and LIBREF-L, during December 2001. Librarians working at the University Of Northern Iowa, the author's home library, were also invited to participate. Twenty-one responses were received overall.

The first question asked whether or not the respondent had ever used examples from feature films, TV shows, cartoons, or comics during library instruction sessions. Fifteen of the respondents had used these sorts of examples. The six respondents who had not used them were asked to fill in their comments about the use of these examples in the final question on the form (Question 8). Thus, there were more responses to the last question than to Questions 2 through 7.

In response to Question 2, fourteen of the fifteen librarians using popular culture examples reported that they had used them with undergraduate students. Some of the responses listed more than one audience level; a few had used the examples with graduate students, and one librarian had used the examples with a high school class. Undergraduate students were the main audience for this instruction technique. This may be because the responding librarians tend to instruct more undergraduate than graduate

classes, or that the examples seemed to the librarians to be more appropriate for an undergraduate audience.

The next question (number 3) asked which types of popular culture media were used as examples. Most of the respondents (twelve) had used comics or cartoons; feature films and TV shows also made a strong showing (eight for each). Some librarians mentioned the use of examples from areas of popular culture that were not included in the survey. These were famous people (musical performers, film directors, famous authors) and other types of media (famous books and TV, print, & WWW ads).

The subject areas of the courses in which the examples were used covered many different fields of study (Question 4). There was a slight preponderance of English composition, information literacy/library skills, and general freshman/general education seminars and library orientations. Students in all of these types of courses tend to be freshmen or new to college study. Once again, this may indicate that librarians tend to use these examples with undergraduates more often than with older students. Otherwise, the subject areas of the classes were diverse and covered such topics as psychology, art, nursing, economics, and administration of justice.

Librarians reported using a wide variety of comics, cartoons, feature films, and TV shows during instruction sessions. Question 5 asked which specific examples were used. There was very little repetition among the responses. The comic strip Calvin & Hobbes was the single source receiving the most reported use. Four librarians reported using it, although

one mentioned that examples from that comic were no longer included in instruction sessions because current undergraduates are no longer familiar with it. Others that were mentioned more than once included the cartoon show *The Simpsons*, the comic The Far Side, and the TV show *Seinfeld*. Several librarians use single-frame cartoons that they described in the survey by relating the joke from the frame. Some librarians indicated that they attempted to stay current with the popular culture examples most interesting to current college students, and some apparently did not. One person had the impression that some students thought their example "was the lamest thing on the planet." One area that could be investigated by future researchers is whether the use of the most current examples is more effective than using long-standing icons of popular culture that could be meaningful to both librarians and students.

Results of the survey indicate that instruction librarians may use these examples for several different purposes. Question 6 asked what librarians were trying to illustrate by using the examples, or what purposes were the examples intended to serve. Several librarians reported they used them either as icebreakers, a humorous way to put the students at ease; or as attention grabbers, to get and hold the students' attention. Sometimes they worked as a way to get students involved with an activity. For example, one librarian initiated an activity that emulated the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. Several other librarians illustrated the research process through examples from films or TV shows where the characters were conducting some type of research. For example, one said that the *X-Files* was used "as an example of tenacity and

determination in doing research." Another librarian said that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was used as "an example of how magical books can sometimes be."

Generally, librarians have used popular culture examples to try to connect with the students by invoking words or images that are familiar or even significant to them. In many cases the students are intended to recognize or relate to the examples. Sometimes the examples present models for the students to emulate when conducting their research. In every case the librarian was attempting to connect with the students in some way, or to help the students make connections that would enhance the research process.

Question 7 on the survey asked whether librarians thought that use of these examples was a successful strategy for the instruction sessions, and to give reasons why or why not. All of the respondents thought that the examples were either entirely or partly successful. Nobody said that they were completely unsuccessful. Sample comments:

"Yes; to get the students' attention, relates to something they know. This is especially important for freshmen."

"Definitely! The students' eyes light up when we're searching for articles on fun topics, rather than articles on the kinesiology of photosynthesis…"

"Yes, for those couple sessions, but I haven't used it lately because I have worked more with graduate students."

"Not entirely sure. Students certainly laughed."

"Yes, [because] one of my primary goals… is to make the research process seem less intimidating. The examples from the media can make me seem more approachable or help students to see a serious topic from a more light-hearted perspective."

Of the fifteen respondents who have used the technique, thirteen thought that it was very successful, and two thought it was only partly successful. The results of Questions 6 and 7 seem to indicate that librarians use popular culture examples for a variety of reasons; in the librarians' opinions their efforts have met with a high to moderate level of success.

This survey did not ask whether the librarians used actual images from films, TV shows, or comics in the classroom, either projected on a screen or as part of a handout. Still, it was possible to tell from the responses that some librarians have shown the images. Other responses seemed to indicate that examples were given verbally in class. The strong familiarity students have with TV shows such as *The Simpsons* or films such as *The Terminator* would insure that just mentioning the examples would bring up similar images and shared understanding for all of the students in a class.

One hindrance to using actual images, of course, is the possibility of violating copyright laws. Question 8 asked for comments concerning the use of popular culture examples during library instruction sessions. Librarians who had not used popular culture examples in instruction sessions were asked to respond to this question, as were those who had used the examples. A few people who do not use them expressed concerns about copyright. One person wrote, "Over the past few years, I have become more aware

of issues concerning copyright. In order to avoid violation of copyright, I no longer use examples such as these in my handouts." Another person who has not used the examples wondered, "Is there copyright clearance that needs to be obtained?" Of course, for those who do not show the images copyright should not be a problem.

Most of the comments in Question 8 were generally positive about the use of popular culture examples, although some expressed concern that it is hard enough to fit the content into a one-shot library instruction session without fitting in the examples as well. These people may have also been thinking of the visual projection of examples rather than using them verbally as part of the instruction presentation.

Several respondents thought that use of these examples helps to bridge the age gap between librarians and students, and that the students tend to see librarians who use the examples as human and friendly. However, one person thought that the students might appreciate the effort, but that they also might "make fun of either how much your example ages you, or how lamely they view your attempts to give 'entertaining' examples." This suggests that it is important to use examples that the students will recognize, and not those that may have been current twenty years ago or more.

Other respondents pointed out that popular culture examples do grab the students' attention, help to involve them in learning, and fit in well with active learning techniques. They also tend to relax the students by putting library research in a familiar context.

Topics for Further Research

This paper is intended as a preliminary look at some instruction librarians' practice of using popular culture examples during library instruction sessions. Future researchers might investigate several aspects of the subject beyond the scope of this survey. These include copyright implications, more accurate measurement of the extent and success of the technique, and a more in-depth study of the methods librarians use to incorporate these examples into instruction sessions.

Conclusion

We've seen that librarians have begun using popular culture examples for several purposes during library instruction sessions. Among others these include gaining and holding students' attention, injecting humor into the sessions, and illustrating the research process. In deciding how to present the examples librarians should consider copyright issues as well as the currency of the film, TV show, or comic they will use. The use of images and examples to interest students can lead to greater attention to and acceptance of the content of the instruction sessions, and has the potential to facilitate creation of a stronger connection between the librarian and the students in a class. This can help to prove to students that, to paraphrase Buffy's friend Willow, library research in college is cool.

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Organization/Address: Rod Library, 1227 W. 27th St., University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50613	Telephone: 319-273-3721	FAX: 319-273-2913
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